Dana Walrath

Transmuting Transgenerational Trauma: Dementia, Storytelling and Healing

BY THE TIME ALICE + DEMENTIA MOVED IN, I HAD ALREADY SPENT A LIFETIME CHASING MY ARMENIAN IDENTITY. I CHERISHED THE STORIES OF MY ARMENIAN ANCESTORS UNLEASHED BY DEMENTIA.

ever before. A rabbit ch to the of the and for after it was just under the edge. After it, never once consid- again. tunnel for the way, and ly that Alice had not a before she and herself

IN COLLEGE, I HAD FILLED MY LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT WITH ARMENIAN TO MAKE UP FOR ITS ABSENCE DURING CHILDHOOD.

bu huy bu: I'M ARMENIAN.

Ne' shun' lyan huy bu: NO! YOU ARE ONLY HALF ARMENIAN.

I JOINED THE SCHOOL'S ARMENIAN CLUB + FELL FOR A HANDSOME REVOLUTIONARY.

WHAT ABOUT CAMBODIA?

THIS IS FOR ARMENIA. WE MUST KEEP OUR MISSION PURE.

HE WASN'T INTO HALF BREEDS.

WHICH HALF?!?
FRONT, BACK?
LEFT, RIGHT?
TOP, BOTTOM?

BUT INSTEAD OF SPEAKING OUT, MY MIND RETURNED TO THE PHRASE I HAD HEARD SO OFTEN AS A CHILD...

YOUR MOTHER BROTHER + SISTER LOOK SO MUCH ALIKE! WHERE DID YOU COME FROM?

WHAT ELSE DID I KNOW BEFORE DEMENTIA?

THAT YEGHISHE + OGHIDAR
HAD AN ARRANGED
MARRIAGE IN NEW
YORK CITY IN 1929,
IN BORROWED CLOTHES.

I CAN ALMOST REMEMBER YEGHISHE
HOLDING MY NEW BABY SISTER IN 1965.

HE WAS A SHOEMAKER
WITH A SHOP ON
PARSONS BLVD.
EACH NIGHT, WITH
SHOTS OF COGNAC
HE DELIVERED TWO
CURSES: THE 1ST TO
THE ENVER PASHA
FOR WHAT HE DID
TO THE ARMENIANS.
THE SECOND TO
CHRISTOPHER
COLUMBUS FOR
DISCOVERING AMERICA.

WHEN YEGHISHE DIED A FEW MONTHS LATER,
WE LIVED THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY.

AS FOR ALICE'S BROTHER,
BEFORE DEMENTIA, I KNEW
HIM BY DIAGNOSIS NOT
BY NAME.

FETAL
CELLS IN THE
AMNIOTIC FLUID
LET US TEST
FOR GENETIC
ANOMALIES.

DURING DEMENTIA I LEARNED...

WHEN MAMA
+ ROSE MOPPED THE
FLOOR, MY JOB WAS
TO MIND HIM OUT
ON THE CORNER.
PEOPLE STARED
+ CALLED HIM
NAMES LIKE
THEY DID ON
THE BUS.

she were filled with
saw maps and pict
om one of the shelves
MARMALADE," but to
she did not like to drop the
neath, so managed to put

I WAS
GLAD WHEN
HE WAS
GONE.

seemed to be no
back to the table, half ho
or at any rate a book of rules
scopes: this time she found a little
was not here before," said Alice), and
bottle was a paper label, with the words

WHERE
DID HE
GO?

THE
WASSAIC STATE
SCHOOL

When I met Alice, I mis-
understood her. I thought
she was a joke, to be
falling over her own feet.
Either she was a fool or
plenty of other things.
What was she doing there?
I thought she was a
thing, like a golden key in
the lock. But you see,
sides of Alice's head
and it was impossible
to go upon door, so she
passed: her key of
great disapproval like tele-
phone, for fear of the
into one of the beautiful

EVERY SUNDAY, PAPA MADE THE TREK TO THE
WASSAIC STATE SCHOOL FOR MENTAL DEFECTIVES.

BIOMEDICINE FRAMES DEMENTIA IN TERMS OF LOSS: OF MEMORY, OF TISSUE, OF FUNCTION, OF SELF, AS THOUGH ONLY HIPPOCAMPAL VOLUME DEFINES US.

THE LITERARY TROPES IN DEMENTIA FOCUS ON EITHER TRAGIC LOSS OF SELF...

TAKE THESE WHEN YOU CAN NO LONGER ANSWER...

* OF STILL ALICE

OR MANIPULATIVE OR FEIGNED LOSS.

I HAVE NO MEMORY.

FOR US, DEMENTIA INCLUDED MAGIC, LOSS, AND THE GAINS OF RE-MEMBERING.

ALL THIS LET MAGIC ENTER MY NOVEL,
 LIKE WATER ON STONE, IN THE FORM
 OF ARDZIV, A GUARDIAN SPIRIT WHO
 WATCHES OVER THE THREE SIBLINGS AS
 THEY RUN FROM PALU TO ALEPPO.
 ARDZIV OPENS THE STORY...

THREE
 YOUNG ONES,
 ONE BLACK POT,
 A SINGLE QUILL,
 AND A TUFT OF RED WOOL,
 ARE ENOUGH TO START
 A NEW LIFE IN A
 NEW LAND. I KNOW
 THIS IS TRUE
 BECAUSE
 I SAW IT.

AS THE YOUNG ONES RAN
 ARDZIV HIMSELF JOURNEYED
 FROM ANGUISH AND ANGER TO PEACE.
 SO DID I. THIS IS THE MAGIC OF STORY.

BEFORE DECIDING THAT I, TOO,
HAVE LOST MY
MARBLES, LET ME
GIVE YOU MY
DEFINITION OF
MAGIC: IT IS
MYSTERIOUS
NATURALLY
OCCURRING
OBSERVED
PHENOMENA
WHOSE
MECHANISMS
HAVE (SO FAR)
ELUDED
SCIENTIFIC
INQUIRY.

OUR CONNECTIONS THROUGH
THE GENERATIONS REMAIN
IN THE REALM OF MAGIC.

DESCENDANTS OF GENCODE ARE
FORMED BY THE USUAL MECHANISMS,
INHERITING A COMPLETE SET OF
INSTRUCTIONS FROM EACH PARENT

OUR CELLS ALSO CARRY LITTLE
INHERITED BITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

ALONG WITH
THEIR MEMORIES,
THEIR STORIES.

AND THOUGH THE SCIENCE OF EPIGENETICS IS BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL SOME OF THE INTERGENERATIONAL IMPACT OF TRAUMA, THE MISSING LAND, HOME, THE PEOPLE WE NEVER MET, LIVES THAT HURT TO IMAGINE...

MECHANISMS ON A CELLULAR LEVEL REMAIN IN THE REALM OF MAGIC.